3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13

Chapter I

CHANGELESSNESS

The fellaheen (1), that is to say the country labourers of Egypt, whose life is the subject of the following chapters, represent something more than a mere class. As a uniform, autochthonous mass, which constitutes more than three quarters of the total population, they may rightly be called the people of Egypt.

This people, which produced the earliest civilisation, or at any rate a civilisation of great originality that has lasted for fifty centuries, shows exceptional powers of survival and persistence.

The fellaheen have changed their masters, their religion, their language and their crops, but not their manner of life. From the distant epochs of the Old Kingdom to the climax of the dynastic period the Egyptian people preserved and maintained itself. Under foreign domination, for years or centuries at a time, by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, French and English, it has remained unchangingly the same. Even today the fellaheen play practically no part in the Egyptian renaissance, or the movement for independence and progress.

They were at first pagans carrying totemism to the point of zoolatry, then for ten centuries Christians who reached the heights of asceticism and martyrdom. They made no difficulties about accepting Islam, and yet thirteen hundred years of Mohammedanism have done little to change their fundamental beliefs.

They are a receptive, yet resistant people; patient, but unyielding. Although they have dwelt so long at the crossroads of international traffic, in a country which has been the scene of earth-shaking events, they remain as calm and unmoved as the depths of the sea beneath a storm.

and new Faculties and Departments have been created. In 1942 a second University was founded, at Alexandria. The Government's primary and secondary schools count their pupils by hundreds of thousands, and are endowed with all the latest improvements. Then there are numerous private schools of older foundation. Even the ancient Moslem University of Al-Azhar has felt the wind of reform, and has established new branches, the Institutes of Shubra, Tanta, Assiut, and Qena. Three thousand teachers are busy with elementary education in the villages. Egyptian publications, whether newspapers, reviews, or books, compare in style and content with the best in Europe, and are a model for all the Arabic-speaking countries. Yet the most important newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, the *Times* of the Near East, has a daily circulation of not more than 100,000, and the farmers' review, *Zamil el-Fellah*, which is published by the Ministry of Agriculture and distributed free, prints only 48,000 copies.

The scientists, scholars, and men of letters who come to Egypt every year for congresses or conferences find in Cairo or Alexandria audiences as eager and open-minded as those of Paris. They are astonished and say so.

Thinkers and students are busy creating a national language, a national music, a national theatre and cinema, something which shall be specifically Egyptian, and not just vaguely Islamic. It is very interesting to follow this development of culture. But we must turn aside to see what is happening below.

Have the masses been caught up in this tide of renewal? Are they following the élite of the cities? The answer is: either not at all or at such a distance that no movement is discernible. Illiteracy still prevails among an overwhelming majority. The latest statistics have had to recognise it. (") It may be that the fault lies with the English, who developed everything in Egypt except education; with the fellaheen themselves, who are not very gifted and show no eagerness to learn; or with a syllabus ill-adapted to their mentality and forced upon them with compulsory education. Whatever the cause the fact remains that 95% of the fellaheen can neither read nor write. Even if they know how to read, they remain strangers to all interchange of

212 ideas, for the literary language in which books and newspapers are written is unfamiliar to them (11).

184 The weakness and the sufferings of the fellaheen arise from their abysmal ignorance in a fast-progressing world. The revival which has just been described only accentuates their isolation and dependence.

178 At the same time, if within the mass no substantial changes can be recorded, outside it some progress may be seen, and inside there are some signs of future evolution.

There is a certain growth in the sense of social responsibility. Progressive Egypt is beginning to pay some attention to unprogressive Egypt, clumsily it may be, by fits and starts, and as yet more in theory than in practice, but at least with the desire to help those who cannot help themselves.

641 Today the fellah has legal rights. He is no longer sub-
446 ject to forced labour at the good pleasure of his masters.
671 There is a code of law, and judges to apply it. It is true that the fellah does not always know how to make use of this, but the law exists, where formerly there was no defence.

641 'To put an end to the cruelty of the pasha, to let the
636 fellah's wife and frightened child have what belongs to them', such was the work of Lord Cromer at the end of the nineteenth century (12). This High Commissioner, who gave much thought to the fellaheen, used all his power to obtain for them at least strict justice. The lash was made illegal, and
[651 taxes were fixed at reasonable rates and periods. The fellah
681 is no longer in constant terror of the *sarraf*. He knows
731 how much he has to pay, and realises that if his field has
661] suffered from flood, drought or fire, the tax is remitted. The venality of officials and the selfishness of big landowners often nullify the benefits of these measures. But they have their effect.

In 1912 Lord Cromer's successor, Lord Kitchener, also caused a law to be passed in favour of the fellah, whereby the dwelling of the small farmer, his necessary implements, two of his cattle and five feddans were exempt from seizure. To make the fellah's finances sounder and accustom him to some kind of system the same High Commissioner established Savings Banks in the villages, where the fellah was to
[453] keep his savings. This institution, perhaps because it was

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compulsory, met with little success, and had to be suppressed after the last war.

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In 1902, after a trial by the National Bank, the Agricultural Bank of Egypt was founded, with the object of providing loans to small farmers at the legal rate of 9%. It opened agencies in all the principal townships, and enjoyed the privilege of being repaid before the taxes. At first it was a success. But the formalities were too complicated, the agencies too far from borrowers in the small villages, the date of repayment too rigidly insisted on, and the whole transaction too public. The fellah preferred to fall back on his moneylender, who was on the spot.

The success of the Agricultural Bank might indeed have been greater if the application of the Five-Feddan Law, by making mortgages impossible, had not dealt it a fatal blow. From the date of this Act the bank abandoned its earlier policy, and in 1930 it went into liquidation.

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The system was revived in an improved form in 1931, with the creation of the *Crédit Agricole d'Egypte*, founded by the Government with the co-operation of the big Cairo anks. To assist its operations the Government agreed to advance a million pounds and suspended the Five-Feddan Law in its favour.

The new institution gives advances to small-holders at 7% and to co-operative societies at 5% up to the amounts required for cultivation and harvesting, for the purchase of cattle, and for the improvement of land. It sells selected seeds and manures on credit to small tenant farmers and share-croppers, and advances them up to 80 % of the value of their crops, if these are deposited in the bank's *shoonas*, scattered all over the country. Understanding the fellah mentality, and profiting by the experience of the Agricultural Bank, it has decentralised its operations, leaving fairly wide powers of discretion to its agents, who go into the villages and reduce formalities to a minimum. It has thus won the confidence of the fellaheen and drawn many of them out of the clutches of the moneylenders, without itself suffering in any way from its own creditors. Nevertheless, it is already tending more and more to help the middle and larger landowners.

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The reader will have noted the special conditions granted by the *Crédit Agricole* to co-operative societies. These have